



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

BEING AN ACTIVE BYSTANDER

WAYS TO CHALLENGE THE EMERGENCE OF BIAS

THE KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & ETHNICITY

Overview

Thank you for your dedication to mitigating the possible effects of implicit bias in your day-to-day life and your professional role. As a national leader in research on how implicit biases unconsciously shape individuals' actions and decisions, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity is committed to delivering the best possible resources to you as you seek to be an active bystander who challenges bias when it emerges in key decision-making moments.

Instructions

Below is a description of how individuals can be active bystanders when faced with the verbal and non-verbal emergence of implicit bias in interpersonal interactions. These suggestions encompass a variety of approaches to opening a conversation about bias. Each person should consider which strategy or strategies might be most appropriate to employ based upon the context of the situation, as well as their own personal strengths and comfortability with using the strategy. This document is intended to provide some tools for being an active bystander while recognizing that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to challenging every manifestation of bias.

Steps to Being an Active Bystander

1. Identify the Emergence of Bias
2. Decide to Address the Situation
3. Take Action
 - Remember, there is a difference between calling someone in (inviting discussion and learning) and calling someone out (shutting down the conversation). Choose which one is most appropriate for the situation.

Strategies for Speaking Out

Use Humor

Examples:

“What are you?” “Human! How about you?”

“That’s so gay!” “I didn’t know that ____ could have a sexual orientation. How does that even work?”

Be Literal or Pretend You Do Not Understand

Examples:

“That stereotype gets me every time! I don’t understand why so many people think that stereotyping an entire group of people makes any sense.”

“I don’t get the joke. Can you explain it to me?” If they say that “it was just a joke” or that “you can’t take a joke” you can say, “I know that you think it’s just a joke. But I don’t think that joke is funny.”

Use Questions that Invite Discussion

Examples:

“What do you mean when you say that?”

“Do you know what that phrase actually means and where it came from? Most people have no idea that it actually has an offensive meaning.”

“Can you explain your thought process to me? I want to be sure I understand how we reached such different conclusions.”

State that You Are Uncomfortable.

Examples:

“That phrase makes me uncomfortable. Could you please not use it around me?”

“That makes me uncomfortable. I don’t think that we can take that assumption for granted or make our decisions based off of it.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Use Direct Communication: Speak honestly and from the heart, using “I statements” to communicate how you are feeling, why that is the case, and what could be done.

Examples:

“When we say that people who are nearing retirement shouldn’t be promoted to this position because they might not be as dedicated at this point in their career, I worry that we aren’t being fair to our older employees. That assumption doesn’t take into account every individual’s circumstances and work ethic, so can we please make sure we aren’t relying on it when deciding who to consider for the position?”

“I know that you aren’t intending to stereotype anyone, but as your friend I wanted to let you know that what you said could easily be interpreted that way. Since I know you’re a good person who cares about others, I would hate for you to accidentally say it again without realizing how it can come across.”

Follow Up When Appropriate

Examples:

Consider what could be done in order to avoid the situation next time.

Continue the conversation with colleagues: one discussion is not as likely to change institutional culture as a series of continuing conversations.